

Reclaiming an Inclusive Church – Part One
Acts 5: 27-32
April 15, 2007

According to a traditional Hebrew story, the patriarch Abraham was sitting outside his tent one evening when he saw an old man, weary from age and journey, coming toward him. Abraham rushed out, greeted him, and then invited him into his tent. There he washed the old man's feet and gave him food and drink. The old man immediately began eating without saying any prayer or blessing. So Abraham asked him, "Don't you worship God?" The old traveler replied, "I worship fire only and revere no other god. "When he heard this, Abraham became incensed, grabbed the old man by the shoulders, and threw him out of his tent into the cold night air. When the old man had departed, God called to his friend Abraham and asked where the stranger was. Abraham replied, "I forced him out because he did not worship you. God answered, "I have suffered him these eighty years although he dishonors me. Could you not endure him one night?"

We are a welcoming church. I don't believe there is any controversy there. We truly believe in "open minds, open hearts, open doors – no exceptions." However, if you read my April *Columns* newsletter article, you'll have noticed a somewhat prickly tone that I took in introducing my new sermon series, *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*. Like Abraham in my little story this morning, we are great at letting people in the door and welcoming them. Then we test their ideas. For every "believing" generation since the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ has tried to put conditions on what it means to be a *true* Christian. Usually those conditions are stated in the form of creeds, doctrines or actions that must be accepted and followed in order for us to call you a Christian and

accept you into the fellowship. Admit it; we do the same. It seems as if there is something fundamentally human to looking down the social “food chain” to see who next will be tested to see if they are fit to join the fellowship of believers. We invoke the same kind of oppression we suffered and say things like, “yeah, but our struggle was different!” Or we say to ourselves, “Is this person truly reconciling?” Only the first generation of the Church of Jesus Christ was truly reconciling in relaxing the entrance requirements of admitting people versus the entrance requirements of previous generations. For that reason, beginning this Sunday for the next six weeks leading up to Pentecost Sunday we will look at the lectionary readings from the Book of Acts to see if we can improve our understanding of being truly reconciling.

Our first reading this morning is very brief. The larger story from which it is abstracted is taken from a time when the church of Jesus Christ was brand-new and really a movement within Judaism. There were only a few thousand believers and they were all Jews. These believers were a sect within the larger Jewish society. Their practices were under great scrutiny by the authorities of Jesus’ day. This story poses several questions that apply to us today in the post-modern church:

1. What are the sources for religious authority?
2. If both sides claim direct revelation from God, who is right?
3. The biggest question is “what are the rules of engagement in religious and theological debate?”

Our text today and the larger story give us some answers to these questions that I think we must examine in our journey to become an inclusive church. Let me give you the Reader’s Digest version of the larger story. Since Pentecost the Apostles had been

preaching the good news of Jesus' resurrection and what it meant to Israel. They preached in the Temple, in the streets, everywhere. Their preaching included a little bit of fire and brimstone in that they pointed the finger at the religious authorities that had Jesus killed, who had "blood on their hands." It was very compelling but raw stuff. The Council, the Sanhedrin, that group of seventy-one men who had total authority, commanded that they stop. When they didn't the Apostles were arrested and thrown in jail. In the middle of the night, an angel (*angellos* means "messenger" so that it could have been a human liberator) sprung them from the pokey and they resumed their preaching in the Temple. The Sanhedrin in our text today meets with them again to question them and determine what further actions should be taken. You have to understand the power of the Sanhedrin. They were the legislative, executive and judicial authority of the Jewish people – judge, jury and executioner! Their leader, the high priest, was appointed either by Rome or by the Herodian leader of his time. When questioned, the Apostles are unrepentant. They say, "Better to obey God than you guys! Yes, you killed Christ. This was the man to bring reconciliation to Israel and you hung him on a tree. We only speak what the Holy Spirit puts on our hearts!" Not only are the Apostles committing heresy by calling for worshipping Jesus in the Temple, but also they are ticking off the judge, jury and executioner. But right after our scene this morning an amazing act of reconciliation happens. A leader named Gamaliel steps to the podium. Now you should know who this fellow was. He was the Teacher at whose feet the Apostle Paul sat to learn Torah. Gamaliel's grandfather was Hillel after whom the Hillel Student Foundation is named. Gamaliel's influence in liberalizing Judaism was felt for centuries. He was the first to bear the title, "Rabban" for "our Master, the Great One."

Some of his liberalizing movements include forbidding husbands to annul divorce proceedings without wives' knowledge and allowing more flexibility of movement on the Sabbath. Rabbinic literature honored Gamaliel so much that it is said, "when Rabban Gamaliel died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died." So Gamaliel steps to the microphone. In a phrase Gamaliel changes the rules of engagement. He says, gentlemen, we have seen false messiahs come and go. In the past, after we've killed a few of their disciples we don't hear another thing from them. Let's do nothing here. If this Jesus is a false messiah, things will fix themselves. If we kill them and this Jesus is the true messiah, we will be directly challenging God. So the Apostles get forty lashes and they release them. The Apostles keep preaching and the Jesus movement continues to grow.

We can learn so much from Gamaliel in our efforts to be a reconciling church. I think Gamaliel demonstrates three principles for changing the rules of engagement in the question not only of full inclusion of GLBT people but in any theological conflict that we find ourselves. First, we need to level the playing field of power and authority. Second, in all our debates, we need to learn to not take it personally to be most effective. Thirdly, we need to take on the attitude of the great Aquinas. More about that one later.

First we need to level this playing field of power and authority. You might say, "That's really tough, Andy, because our opponent holds most of the power." It can still be done. I learned this from Amdahl and Abraham. What do I mean? When I was in the computer business I worked for a company named Amdahl. They were David and IBM was Goliath. IBM had 80% of the business and we had about 14%. But I knew how to raise my win rate to 50%. Here's how. I had to learn and know their products and

services better than they knew themselves. I had to be totally honest with my customers about their product superiorities as well as my own. And if I acted on behalf of my customers' best interests I could win every time. Dr. Billy Abraham teaches the same method at Perkins School of Theology. He teaches his students to know every argument in detail to every theological problem. Be able to argue every side and you will level the playing field. Gamaliel, although he was on the side without absolute power, voluntarily surrendered that power so that time, with the help of the Holy Spirit, could be the final arbiter of truth.

The second point is that in these passionate debates is to never take it personally. We sometimes confuse passion with emotionalism. In any argument, once you cross the line over to emotionalism, you begin to lose. You may get sympathy, but sympathy is a passing advantage. Cooler heads always prevail. Look at Gamaliel. While all his friends were losing to their emotions of the accusation of Jesus' blood being on their hands, Gamaliel stays cool and on point. He is able to see the bigger picture and take the longer-term perspective. It was only from that perspective that God could use him. How is it with us? Are we able to see beyond the claims of our opponent without taking it personally? The reality is that most often it is not intended to hurt or injure.

Emotionalism only escalates the conflict and separates the parties into camps that cannot be reconciled. I have learned so much from Troy Plummer. One of his strongest attributes is his ability to keep a level head under intense pressure. I think this is a key to Troy keeping his energy and passion for the cause of reconciliation. I haven't talked to Troy about this but I believe this is an acquired skill. My guess is that Troy had learned

this attribute over many years. You who know him better than I could attest to whether or not this is true.

The final principle is only implied by Gamaliel. It's what I call the Aquinas principle. Aquinas was the greatest theologian of the late middle ages. His logic still dominates the academy in the Roman Catholic Church. For all his brilliance and logic, it is how his heart was revealed in a quote that I received a couple of months ago that I want to share with you now. Actually, if you get emails from me you have seen it in my signature. Here is what Aquinas says:

*We must love them both,
Those whose opinions we share,
And those whose opinions we reject,
For both have labored in the search for truth,
And both have helped us in the finding of it.*

There is an attitude expressed in the attitude of Aquinas that I wish I could bottle and preserve, if only for my own consumption. What I think Aquinas is expressing is that our theological debates are really explorations in which all parties are partners. We all share a common purpose in finding truth and the only reality is that none of us really possesses it. If I really have that attitude then it colors everything for me. I hang on every word of my opponent's argument. I am obsessed in finding the truth of what she says to me. I don't take anything personally because I assign a new motivation to her thoughts and words. Her motivation is the same as mine. I am in holy conversation to finally hear the whisper of the Spirit. The playing field is now completely level because

we walk on Holy Ground. Our shoes and our gloves are off. We want only to learn from each other for the common pursuit of truth.

Brian McLaren, a pastoral leader of the Emergent Church, a movement that is largely an evangelical movement, has called for a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements about full inclusion of GLBT people. I don't know if I have the patience for that, but here's his reflection: "In the meantime," says McLaren, "we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection. After all, many important issues in church history took centuries to figure out. Maybe this moratorium would help us resist the "winds of doctrine" blowing furiously from the left and right, so we can patiently wait for the wind of the Spirit to set our course."

McLaren, for me, speaks like a modern-day Gamaliel. What do you think? Is his attitude reconciling? Are his words wise or merely weak? You be the judge of that question. But for me, the message that emerges between the lines of his words is this: The Mind of God is already made up on this question. From eternity God is whispering to us God's ultimate will on this question. Let's listen rather than talk; let's study together rather than hammer the other side with half-truths. Unlike our Father Abraham, let's invite our adversary into our tent, wash his feet, eat from the same table, and endure our differences not one night, but for many nights to come.